



Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell

Councilor Maureen T. Carney

Councilor Alisa F. Klein

Councilor Gina-Louise Sciarra

Meeting Minutes

Date: September 19, 2016

Time: 4:00 p.m.

**Location: City Council Chambers
212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts**

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call:** At 4:06 p.m. Councilor Sciarra called the meeting to order. Present were the following Councilors: Councilor Sciarra, Councilor Klein, Councilor Bidwell and Councilor Carney. No other City Councilors were present. Councilor Klein left the meeting at 5:50 p.m.
2. **Public Comment:**

Councilor Sciarra explained that the rules of conduct for public comment are the same as a full City Council meeting. The Chair asks for civility and respect for all participants. Speakers may say what they would like about City Council members, councilors will not respond to comments. Speakers are asked to refrain from defaming any other person. Speakers are asked to state name and address for the record and all comments should be limited to 3 minutes or less.

Councilor Sciarra explained that today's meeting is a regular committee meeting in which the Councilors are going to discuss the CSR. There will not be another time for members of the public to interact with the committee; members of the audience are encouraged to come forward during public comment. An audience member asked if people will have the opportunity to speak at another time during the meeting; Councilor Sciarra indicated that today is not a public forum or hearing; audience members speak only during the scheduled Public Comment period.

Nancy Cowen from Happy Valley thanked the Committee for holding the forums.

Peter Seterdahl is an Amherst resident who owns two buildings in Northampton. The panhandling issue is of particular concern for him as a landlord. Businesses that he rents to may or may not be affected by the panhandling issue. It has been Mr. Seterdahl's observation that

many panhandlers appear to be drug addicted or mentally ill. He indicates that this is a blanket statement and does not apply to all panhandlers. By giving them money, Mr. Seterdahl feels that we are supporting the continuation of their addiction. Mr. Seterdahl recently read a letter in the Gazette where a writer offered setting up boxes to put money in to support programs and agencies that offer people help or services, such as clothing, food, etc. By giving the money directly to the panhandlers, the problem will just continue to be perpetuated. He heard that the committee is looking for creative ideas to try to address the problem, the suggestion offered in the Gazette seemed to be a reasonably good idea.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

- A. Minutes of July 18, 2016: Councilor Klein moved to approve the minutes; Councilor Bidwell seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

4. Review of CSR findings summary of topics/comment tally by Jonathan Goldman

Councilor Sciarra noted that the committee will not just focus on a single topic today, but will be discussing all of the topics that were raised during the forums. She believes that the media might be under the wrong impression that the committee will be addressing only the topic of panhandling.

The committee reviewed the tally of items that was compiled by Jonathan Goldman with the help of committee member Councilor Bidwell. Mr. Goldman went through the minutes and (and possibly videos) and came up with topics that were brought up. He then did a tally of how many people spoke to that issue. Councilor Sciarra suggested going through the list category by category and consider those topics that the committee could pursue further or to identify those topics that the committee will not pursue because it is not appropriate.

Councilor Bidwell noted that the tally is not a scientific quantitative analysis, but it does give a sense of what themes people talked about. He believes that items do fall into categories where it is not appropriate for the committee to tackle. In other cases the committee might want to recommend that other parties take action. Councilor Bidwell also believes that there are some issues where misinformation can be corrected by the committee. He would like to see the committee make progress concerning the topics the committee will definitely pursue or not pursue.

Councilor Carney indicated that the summary information is very helpful. She notes that some topics are higher numerically than others based on the amount of time that the issues were brought up. Councilor Sciarra indicated that even though some topics may have a higher frequency of discussion, this does not mean that the issues are more important than others.

Discussion of CSR findings topics for further deliberation

Arts Capital Dollars Not Enough

At the last public forum the committee invited different members within the arts community to come and talk to the committee. The most tangible recommendation that the committee heard was that there was interest in expanding the use of CPA funds to support arts projects. Councilor Sciarra noted that this is not something that the committee could do on their own, but rather could support or talk about supporting. The presenters brought up the objections that could be faced. It

is an interesting way to raise support. Councilor Klein noted that the **Council cannot alter the purpose of CPA funds; this has to happen at the State Legislative level. If it is identified by Arts organizations that they think the Council should move forward to advocate for this, then she supports the Council doing so.** Councilor Klein feels that the committee didn't get enough input from other vibrant arts organizations in the City. A number of organizations would like to figure out how to foster more interaction in the City and municipal government and to get what they feel like would be more support. The committee could go with the recommendation of Richard Wagner of the Arts Trust; the committee could write a letter of support or an op-ed in support of shifting CPA funds to include the Arts. Councilor Klein would like to think more broadly about how City Council can foster arts and arts organizations. There were a lot of problems that were identified during the forums, but this is one that could be approached with a lot of positivity and can be seen as a way of fostering something positive.

Councilor Bidwell noted that when the topics were divided into categories, most of the arts-related comments fell into the events/promotions category. There were a lot of interesting and specific suggestions. With regard to CPA, Councilor Bidwell would not be enthusiastic about further diluting the CPA pool of money.

Councilor Sciarra envisioned whittling down the current list to things that the committee feels like they can spend more more time on. She would like to pare the list down so that over the next few months, the committee can talk about one or two topics during the committee meetings. In between the meetings councilors can look more in depth at the upcoming topics independently and then come to the meeting ready to delve into the topic.

Events/Festivals/Promotions

This list included specific recommendations, such as more promotion of Arts Walks, a year-round / permanent downtown market, more travel website visibility, more festivals and events, an artist market, spread events around downtown, keep up Bag Day and Sidewalk Sales, put a bandshell in Pulaski Park, provide more venue for arts, and provide pop-up art in vacant retail spaces.

Councilor Bidwell commented that between the Center for the Arts, DNA, the Arts Trust, and the Northampton Rec Department, there is already people talking about all of these things. One possibility would be to see if there was interest in convening a meeting with those organizations to inform the committee about progress that has been made and to help foster coordination between the organizations. It can be a learning and an information session with the sharing of information going both ways.

Councilor Sciarra suggested that maybe the committee could come up with its own topics, such as "support for legislation", her feeling is that many things could not be addressed by the City Council, however, the Council could support and encourage the people involved.

Councilor Klein noted that committee members may have some possibilities about the topics that are listed, but probably not as much as other people who are actively engaged day after day with this kind of thing. Councilor Klein likes the idea of convening folks, but the most important thing to think about is setting limits--some topics could turn into projects that could consume every meeting. She would like to ask the stakeholders for concrete guidance about what they would like the committee to do. Then the committee could figure out what it can and cannot do. The

committee could hand-pick the leaders from each of the organizations or the committee could send out a letter or brief survey asking what the top priorities are and what they envision the City Council being able to do for their organization.

Councilor Carney noted that there used to be a City Council subcommittee dedicated to the Arts. Folks who are involved with these organizations would probably appreciate the extent to which the City council can offer support.

Councilor Sciarra noted that the committee is tasked with a giant thing to look at. She would like the process to come to an end at some point. The committee has invested a lot of time already. The committee has already issued a report which is a summary of how the committee collected data. At the end, when the committee is done deliberating about the topics, she would like the committee to produce something else that perhaps keeps the general themes, but also includes further recommendations. The whole point of the CSR is to see how the City Council Committees can be more engaged.

Councilor Sciarra noted that the Arts seems to be a topic that the committee is interested in discussing further. She wondered if the committee planned to discuss this at a future meeting, what that discussion might look like. Maybe this is a topic that the committee says, we heard these twelve suggestions, we think that they have merit, and we would like to look into them further or we would like to find a way to work with Arts organizations.

Councilor Klein suggested that the way the committee started out made a lot of sense. Going down the list before making any final decisions makes sense.

Amazon Online Sales Impacts

Councilor Sciarra noted that people were generally concerned across multiple meetings and she shares the concern. Councilor Bidwell suggested that this is a real issue but practically speaking, the committee is limited in ways that they can make a direct impact. If the committee were to do an op-ed, they could reinforce the notion of “shop local”.

Councilor Carney thought that there were resolutions that promote shopping local. It is something for the City to consider when doing business with vendors. She didn't think there was a mechanism to remind people to shop local, but perhaps there is a way to do this and show that the City is a leader in this area.

Councilor Klein thought this was a great suggestion and is also thinking about other things that are commerce related; one of the things that she imagines is that the committee figure out how to make a series of recommendations to the Mayor and the Economic Development Office to ask that city departments and offices to promote shop local. The committee could figure out how to frame some of the messages that they heard. It may include doing a focused session with the Chamber of Commerce to see if they have suggestions about how this can be deployed.

Councilor Sciarra recalled that Ms. Cowen talked about what she would like to bring to her own business. She is reimagining her business as a place of experience. She also talked about creating events to foster economic growth within downtown.

Casino Impact Worries

This topic was mentioned a few times across more than one meeting. Councilor Sciarra noted that there is an open ended question: How do we make coming to Northampton possible even when there are other things vying for their attention?

City Attitude Toward Business

Councilor Sciarra noted that there are multiple concerns listed under this topic. Comments include that the City is not supportive enough and that the City Council sided with labor at the Hotel Northampton. There was also praise for how the City uses tax dollars and for continuing with a single tax rate. Sub categories also included that the City is not supportive of the Arts, and that it is ambiguous about code enforcement.

Councilor Klein noted that by virtue of the process that the committee is using, the Committee is demonstrating that it is being supportive of businesses.

Cost of Doing Business Downtown

The committee reviewed the subcategories. Councilor Carney stated that having Terry Masterson clarify downtown rents are “within the ballpark” relative to other towns helped to figure out where the City fell. There is the perception that rents are too high, but when compared to other communities, this doesn’t seem to be the case.

Councilor Bidwell asked Terry Masterson (who was in the audience) about the updated economic indicator data that was put on the City’s website in August. He wondered if the new information has gotten enough attention and whether it has countered the negative perception about the health of downtown. Director Masterson noted that the statistics that came out in the middle of the year changed the perception since the data came out at the beginning of the year. At the beginning of the year, the data showed that there were a lot of empty store fronts. The midyear report showed that many of the storefronts that were empty in January were still empty in the summer. In the meantime twenty other retail transactions went on in the downtown that filled some store fronts or occupied exiting businesses. He noted that it will be interesting to see changes when the next round of indicators is published. To the question of retail rents, a store owner can go on the City’s website and see what rents are being paid in other communities (Hartford, New Haven, White Plains) and they can hopefully understand that rents are fair and proportionate here. The rents here are at those levels and that says something about the climate here. People have said don’t bother to compare rents to Springfield, Holyoke, or Chicopee; the gap is so wide compared to those communities. Northampton stands up to major retail markets, like New Haven or Hartford. Director Masterson noted that the Brake King property on Pleasant Street has an estimated rent on the website of \$23 per foot. At 2,000 sq. ft, that is almost \$50,000 per year that a business owner would pay in rent. A business will have to have a good revenue stream to meet the rent. Councilor Bidwell asked what the City Councilors could do to get that information out there. Director Masterson indicated that the information is continually on the website. He does not believe that any other town or city has that much information on their

website. He believes that there will be a greater conversation in the coming year about what impact, if any, the casino will have on downtown businesses. That will force a lot of stakeholders to talk to each other to determine if this is something that should be a concern, that can be prepared for, and to determine if there are other areas for downtown growth that can offset the casino impact. Whatever else happens, building owners are going to have to talk to store owners and have a conversation about that issue.

Councilor Sciarra thought there were not a lot of things that the City Council could do to impact concerns in this category, the sub topics are not under the City Council jurisdiction. Councilor Carney noted that the cost of sidewalk signs for 2nd floor businesses is an exception. Councilor Sciarra agreed; that is the one item in this category that the City Council could have an impact on. The item was marked to talk about further.

Councilor Klein noted that one thing that she heard which is not on the list is the issue that landlords are holding out for rents that are higher than the median rent in the city. The concern was that this was driving other rents higher. She recalls that there were questions about whether some incentive could be given if storefronts were continually occupied. She believes that there is not a lot that can be done in this area. Councilor Sciarra noted that this topic is covered under Vacant Retail Spaces; beyond one property owner that has kept places empty, there are fairly normal vacancy cycles. Also on this list is the Calvin Theater missing letter "A"; she notes that there has been some movement on that this past week. One of the recommendations is an ordinance requiring rentup and city incentives to keep property rented. Councilor Klein would like to have more of a sense as to whether or not it is really an issue. She would like to know if the vacant properties by one owner really does impact other property rents; if that is the case, she would like to see if there is something that the City Council could do. Councilor Bidwell shared that in his own view, after talking with others is that is not the case. One property owner utilizes a business model that is not understood by everyone; other property owners would rather rent out their buildings, even if that means adjusting the rents appropriately. He does not know if there is anything that the City Council could do to force a property owner to rent if he does not want to. He would prefer to find a way to get a message out there that with the exception of one property owner, the rents are not out of line. To some extent, the City is a victim of its own success as a community that people like to do business in. There is a lot of things that the Council can do, but this is one where the market needs to work its way through over time. Councilor Sciarra noted that if the committee wanted to do more research, this is an option.

Downtown Condo Owners not Supported Enough

Councilor Sciarra noted that the Council does not have much control over this. The one thing that can be done, is that there needs to be more code enforcement. Building Commissioner Louis Hasbrouck came to the City Services meeting and seemed to be aware of the issues relating to downtown code enforcement issues. Councilor Bidwell noted that he is not sure that he knows enough about these types of issues to know whether they are isolated issues and not representative of a larger problem.

Downtown Northampton Association (DNA)

There seems to generally be some supportive comments about the DNA. There were a few people who thought that liquor license revenue should be used for a downtown lighting program.

Councilor Sciarra wasn't sure if this could be a possibility, but suggested that this question could be part of a list of questions that could be posed to the Mayor.

Food Truck/Carts

Councilor Sciarra suggested that there may be a reason why food trucks are limited in the downtown area. She suggested looking into the history of this and see what recommendations could be brought forward.

Councilor Klein noted that there was a comment about pop-up food events in empty retail locations. Councilor Bidwell suggested it might be possible to do an experiment with food trucks, perhaps in areas that are not directly competing with downtown businesses. Councilor Sciarra suggested that this might already be legal; there were food trucks around town for a while, so she believes that the ordinance is specific to downtown and that elsewhere they are allowed. The committee would like to look into this further.

Negativity About Downtown Harmful

Councilor Sciarra noted that there are some general concerns about this. Some people commented that the improvements to the Academy is great; Councilor Sciarra agrees. She noted that the specific concerns listed in this category seem contrary to the topic heading. Regarding the specific concern about people seeing all restaurants as bad, Councilor Bidwell explained that in the context of worker issues and wage theft issues, the way the media portrayed the discussions, all restaurants were seen as "bad". Many shorthand comments don't capture the richness of the conversations that took place. Councilor Sciarra recommended that committee members go through the minutes again and maybe watch the videos to get the full depth of what was expressed. The recommendation that the City needs to celebrate major public and private investments, Councilor Bidwell suggested that the investments have been substantial, both public and private, and perhaps more attention needs to be drawn to them. Councilor Sciarra noted that this is a perception category, and she hopes that the work of the committee will fix or alleviate that perception.

Panhandling

Councilor Bidwell explained that this was a topic that Jonathan Goldman did a little more research about. Mr. Goldman looked discovered that there are a few cities that have repurposed their old parking meters for the purpose of using them as collection boxes throughout the City. Mr. Goldman looked at examples of those programs in Pasadena, Denver, and Orlando. He was particularly impressed with how the program was working in Denver. There was also a program in Albuquerque where workers are hired on the spot as day laborers to perform various tasks around the City. There is also the idea of strategically placing street musicians in various locations around the City. Licenses were given in locations where panhandlers were attracted to and panhandlers were encouraged to move along. This might be an area where a group of people are convened and these ideas are looked at and considered. The Committee agreed that this would be a topic that they will cover more in-depth.

Councilor Klein notes that the City Council has been pushed about this issue for years; she doesn't want this committee to recreate the wheel. In the past when the City Council tried to

regulate panhandling in some way, there was a mass outcry. The Vibrant Sidewalk resolution came out of that. It was an attempt to affirm that everyone and anyone could be on our sidewalks. Councilor Klein feels very strongly that she would not want to regulate panhandling.

Parking

Councilor Sciarra explained that there are general concerns, and also a specific concern raised about the Union Station Lot. Overall, people also feel that enforcement is too aggressive in downtown. Recommendations were made to extend parking times, and to add credit card payments. Regarding replacing ticket machines, the suggestion was given to replace ticket machines with online reservations. Councilor Sciarra noted that some of these items can be checked off because there are plans to implement the ideas already. Also on the list was rear angled parking. Councilor Carney recalled that rear angled parking has already been tried. The experiment did not go over well at all. Councilor Bidwell reflected that a much bigger area is needed for the experiment. If you select only one isolated area, it will confuse people and likely be a disaster. Councilor Klein noted that it is probably irrelevant because there is a plan to redesign downtown streets. Also, some of the items in this category should be addressed by the Transportation and Parking Commission, rather than this committee. Councilor Sciarra noted that not all items belong to TPC. Councilor Carney recalled that there were questions and concerns about loading/unloading of vehicles, especially when patronizing downtown merchants. Councilor Sciarra explained that there was a downtown business patron who was loading her vehicle and was ticketed. Councilor Klein would like to get a better understanding about the parking ticket appeals process. Councilor Sciarra recommended that the committee reserve time to talk about these issues a little bit more.

Smith College

Regarding this topic, Councilor Klein feels that there is not much that can be done with this topic. Councilor Sciarra agreed.

Start Up Costs of Small Business

It had been recommended that the City have a start-up grant for small businesses (similar to the grant program in Dallas). Councilor Klein believes that there are resources in the City to help with startups but they are not operated by the City. She wasn't sure if the City could play a role in accessing that resource. Councilor Sciarra indicated that Valley CDC does that kind of work. They hold classes about small business ownership. Regarding lending, Councilor Bidwell stated that the City is fortunate that there are a lot of resources for consulting and networking. This is different than getting a loan which tends to be tough. Councilor Klein suggested talking to the DNA and to the Chamber of Commerce; they may be a better resource to promote resources for small businesses.

Tourism

There was a comment that more money is needed to promote tourism. Councilor Klein wondered if the Economic Development Office could be more proactive at promoting tourism, or perhaps that office could work with the Chamber and DNA

Transportation

Regarding the recommendation of “wider accessibility”, Councilor Bidwell suggested that this meant availability of transportation resources more times throughout the day, more frequently scheduled PVRTA service, etc. Councilor Sciarra noted that the City already does try to lobby for more bus service with PVRTA, and the Council could try to be more supportive of that effort. Councilor Klein noted that the Mayor sits on the PVRTA advisory body. She raised the question of whether there has ever been a Council member involved on the advisory board; perhaps this is something that can be recommended. Councilor Klein also raised a question about the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. She is aware that they played a role in encouraging Amtrak service; she wonders if there is some kind of communication that could be done here. Councilor Bidwell notes that there have been very extensive conversations and there is a group that meets with some regularity. This could be one a topic in which the committee could get a brief update from Terry Masterson. That request could be made of the Mayor. Councilor Klein suggested that this could be something for the Transportation and Parking Commission.

Worker Issues / Concerns

Councilor Sciarra noted that there was a very organized effort to talk to worker issues at almost every meeting. Councilor Carney noted that the notion of wage theft legislation was circulating around before the Committee on Community Resources began the CSR. There has been a lot of work in other communities as well. What Councilor Carney has noticed is that there is a possibility of tying legislation to three areas of doing business with the City: licensing; procurement; and building related permitting. Several questions were raised. Every town that has adopted wage theft legislation has their own way of looking at things. In Worcester, the wage theft ordinance is tied to City contracts. Some other towns had legislation tied to City contracts and licenses. Councilor Carney has been told that trying to tie building permits at all raises an issue of home rule. Councilor Carney believes that the Council can address many of the concerns that were raised at the forum, perhaps looking at licenses. Currently business owners can attest that they have paid their taxes in full and that they carry a workman's comp policy. Councilor Carney suggests that this can be an additional form for the business owner to complete in which they attest to complying with Massachusetts wage and hour laws or that they reveal a finding against the company and therefore agree to post a wage bond. Licenses would be tied to such compliance. This approach would deal with the concerns that were raised by the restaurant industry. To deal with the issues raised by the construction industry, Councilor Carney suggests that this may require a conversation with the Mayor's Office. The City's ordinances don't deal with procurement at all. The City has a procurement guideline manual that outlines procurement procedures. Perhaps the Council could ask the Mayor to include guidelines when working with vendors to ensure that they are complying with wage and hour laws. Most of the requirements can be done by filling out a form with some level of follow-up to ensure compliance. Draft legislation is being finalized; Councilor Carney and Councilor Klein are hoping to begin conversations with the Mayor's Office in the next few weeks. Regarding timing, Councilor Carney is not sure if the Committee wants to discuss this matter given the material that was distributed early on. Councilor Sciarra understands that there is work being done outside of the Committee, and assumes that whatever is brought forward would be referred to the Committee on Community

Resources and to the Committee on Legislative Matters. In the interest of not doing double work, Councilor Sciarra would prefer to wait until the outcome of that work is referred to Community Resources. If certain portions are not being worked on presently, like procurement, then the committee could discuss it and come up with its own recommendations.

Councilor Bidwell remains curious about implementation and enforcement of wage theft policies. Councilor Klein noted that looking at other sub issues; some of those are built into a wage theft ordinance, however there can be some advocacy that could be done at the state house. Legislation in the form of a resolution is a possibility or writing a letter from the Council to relevant legislators might be considered. Councilor Carney stated that there is the legislation that the Senate passed this term and it didn't get taken up by the House. Peter Kocot was one of the co-sponsors of the legislation. Supporting legislation that is already drafted could be considered by the committee. Perhaps a resolution might be the best form to demonstrate the Council's support. This is legislation that would provide more enforcement dollars to the Attorney General's Office, among other things. It also broadens the scope of the AG's powers. Councilor Sciarra noted that more discussion is possible. Councilor Klein suggested researching the legislation that has already been drafted and sharing this information with the committee.

Councilor Sciarra noted that the committee has reached the end of the list. Only a few items do not require further discussion. Councilor Bidwell noted that there are 4 - 5 questions that could be referred to the Mayor. A number of issues can be tackled in a working meeting with arts organizations or service organizations. Some could be discussed if the Chamber and the DNA could meet with the committee. Councilor Klein loves the idea of working groups because it is a collaborative process. She would hope that the working groups would get good direction in order to avoid just gathering more data. She would like the committee to hone in on what the questions and objectives are. Councilor Bidwell agrees. If the committee decided to move in that direction, the agenda would need to be agreed upon and specific questions determined. Councilor Sciarra would take it one step further and say that the committee could pose this as one of the recommendations. She worries that the process could go on forever. Councilor Klein noted that there could be a difference in wrapping up the study and going to a deeper place for an issue.

Councilor Klein suggested re-working the chart to condense it and to recreate the chart into working areas. This will be done by the Committee Chair and the Administrative Assistant. Councilor Sciarra will assign topics for the next few meetings.

Councilor Bidwell wondered if others might be invited to the meetings, for example Arts organizations. Councilor Bidwell could see one 90-minute or 60-minute conversation with a set number of topics. After the meeting, the committee would be done; the committee would have gathered more information, at that point they might be able to make a recommendation or two. One of the recommendations might be that the group continue to work on the issues without committee member involvement. He does not see the work open ended, but rather one finite meeting with experts and no intention or expectation that the work continue. Councilor Klein suggested that since the committee would need to meet again to come up with the questions, the process be tabled until the next meeting. Councilor Bidwell agreed, however, he is willing to

work with the Chair to come up with a draft of questions that might be submitted to two or three different groups.

Councilor Sciarra would like to use resources that are brought in for the purpose of clarifying law and things like that. She feels that more data is not needed at this point. Councilor Bidwell would rather conclude the committee work by saying that the committee convened a meeting and got the ball rolling and they now have it on their own. Councilor Carney does not feel strongly one way or the other.

Councilor Sciarra and Councilor Bidwell agreed to come up with a list of questions and to come to a conclusion about how to handle the final steps of the committee's process. Councilor Bidwell wondered if a list of questions might be sent to the Mayor; Councilor Sciarra would like to develop a concise list of recommendations before this happens.

6. New Business: None

7. **Adjourn:** At 5:53 pm Councilor Bidwell moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Carney seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 3 yes, 0 no 1 absent (Councilor Klein).

Prepared By:

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